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Writing versions of home: Marosia Castaldi's *Per quante vite* and the poetics of the visible*

Adalgisa Giorgio

Abstract

What happens to the object and idea of house/home in a world of inner displacement and geographical uprooting? This article looks at the representation of house/home in Marosia Castaldi's novel *Per quante vite* (1999) [*For How Many Lives*], focusing on the coincidence between house and psyche highlighting the protagonist's spatial dislocation, the loss of the maternal body leading to 'homelessness' and lack of memory, and the attempt to overcome this condition by creating alternative homes in the body and writing. Castaldi deploys a poetics of absence-presence and full-void that signifies both her protagonist's neurosis and the remedies for it: her body's *capacity* to contain and generate life and a writing practice that fills books with the matter of life and finds in books templates for life. The article argues that Castaldi's protagonist succeeds in realizing the feminist project of 'giving birth to the world' pursued by feminist philosophers of difference.

Keywords: Castaldi; *Per quante vite*; Saint-Pierre; *Paul et Virginie*; house/home; the body; the maternal; the visible; female realism

1. Introduction

The emergence of separate private and public spaces and spheres in Europe between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century brought with it the association of women with private life, the family home and domesticity (Habermas 1989; Hareven 1993; Sarti 1995). In Italy, the Risorgimento ideal of woman as *angelo del focolare* [angel of the

hearth] – as procreator, carer and educator of children, and as transmitter of moral, religious and patriotic values – has been revamped at different times, notably during the early decades of Italian unification, during the Fascist regime and in the 1950s (D’Amelia 1997; Signorelli 2006). For generations of Italian women the house has, therefore, been both a symbol and the reality of their existence. Rita Wilson has recently argued that Italian women writers in the second half of the twentieth century ‘question the *topos* of the home as a steady, sheltering and peaceful environment where traditionally women have been depicted as finding fulfilment’ (Wilson 2007: 343). Instead, these writers represent houses ‘as spaces of contestation, of resistance, of imagination’, as metaphors of self-displacement, or as a way of locating themselves in the world, thus deconstructing the private-public opposition (336, 334). The notion of a stable and protective home is sometimes present, but only as a reverie (337).

There is actually little critical evidence to support the idea that Italian authors, male or female, ever represented the house as a feminine, nurturing space for either men or women, except perhaps as an ideal. Anna Maria Cassanmagnago and Luisa Settimo (1999–2001), for example, find that, in selected (male) authors from as far back as the mid-nineteenth century to the present, houses act as mirrors of intersecting social and personal crises. The numerous poetic images of the house as a ‘felicitous space’ of intimacy, shelter and protection that replicates the maternal psychic space, which Gaston Bachelard (1969: xxxi, and generally Chapter 1) finds in such French authors as Henri Bosco and Henri Bachelin among others, are not to be found in Italian women’s writing. In Italy as in other European countries and in America, nineteenth-century middle-class women were subjected to opposing pressures: at the same time as they were encouraged to develop their capacities and were given opportunities for self-improvement, they were also expected to devote themselves to the moral and physical

well-being of the family (Chi 1999: 88). The protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The yellow wallpaper' (1892) is confined, by her physician husband, to the attic as a therapy against her nervous breakdown: her physical incarceration is accompanied by a prohibition to write, an activity that he believes will exacerbate her condition. Significantly, Josef Breuer's and Sigmund Freud's hysterics were intelligent and strong-willed middle-class women who felt stifled by their family environment (Cixous and Clément 1987: 8). In Italy, the didactic project of nineteenth-century women writers, progressive and conservative alike, of exposing women to the new ideas circulating outside the home and to the modernization of the country presupposed a 'sometimes tacit, and yet omnipresent, ideal of domestic femininity' which kept them in a condition ranging from boredom to wretchedness (Romani 2006: 14).

This dual pressure – embracing new models and ideas and being good housekeepers and mothers – has been a feature of Italian women's lives also in the twentieth century, which 1970s feminism and women's emancipation, as well as the employment of migrants as domestic help, have alleviated but not removed. From the 1880s to the 1970s and beyond, authors as ideologically diverse, and as diversely placed on the continuum between realism and experimentalism, as Neera (Anna Radius Zuccari), Marchesa Colombi, Matilde Serao, Sibilla Aleramo, Maria Messina, Annie Vivanti, Grazia Deledda, Gianna Manzini, Paola Masino, Alba de Céspedes, Natalia Ginzburg, Carla Cerati, Dacia Maraini, Silvana Castelli and Alice Ceresa present the house as a space of isolation, suffocating domesticity and oppressive family ties that hinder individuality, self-agency and talent. They expose the gap, more or less overtly and more or less consciously, between externally imposed ideals and the reality of women's lives, drawing attention either to women's exclusion from the public sphere or to the discontinuity between domestic and external worlds when, for example, they also

work outside the home. More recently, in postmodern times of fragmentation of the self, inner displacements, migrations and generally precarious lives, literary houses are made to reveal even more lucidly critical aspects of the individual's private world in relation to the social context: in such cases, the house as a symbol and a locale of safety and stability may be present only as a longed-for ideal. Furthermore, the image of the book as a paper home that writers make for themselves, originating in the long-standing analogy between the writer's craft and the construction of a house, is now explored metanarratively. The text itself becomes a version of home, erecting impalpable walls around the writing self to replace concrete walls that do not offer shelter or are not there at all. This questioning of what house and home represent to women is explored here in contemporary Italian author Marosia Castaldi's novel *Per quante vite* (1999) [*For How Many Lives*].

Born in Naples in 1951, Castaldi now lives in Milan. She studied philosophy in Naples and art at Brera's Academy of Fine Arts. Her background in the visual arts makes her particularly sensitive to questions of representation. Castaldi is a visionary writer, combining postmodern concepts of identity with archetypes of the Neapolitan imaginary and mythology linked to the precariousness of life and death. She also blends postmodernist aesthetics and an interest in textuality with a realism rooted in lived experience and the body. She thus succeeds in translating everyday life onto to the plane of the tragic and even the epic. Her work presents much more radical psychological and social scenarios than the narratives examined by Wilson, focusing on (primarily) female characters who experience psychic dissociation to an almost pathological level as well as frequent and highly traumatic uprootings.

The inner strife of the protagonists of *Ritratto di Dora* (1994) [*Portrait of Dora*], *Per quante vite* and *Che chiamiamo anima* (2002) [*That We Call Soul*] is immediately

signalled through the name, Dora/Doroty [*sic*], which they have in common with Freud's famous hysteric. They share a split self, personal losses and an obsession with duality. In *Per quante vite*, Dora Spengel often switches from the first person to talk about herself and to herself in the third and second persons. The second Dora helps the first to recompose the pieces of her shattered body and psyche. Dora is always off centre in relation to her own life: 'la mia vita [...] non posso passarci sopra né sotto né a fianco né di lato. Mi limito a starci a fianco di lato. Abbastanza prossima' (Castaldi 1999: 9) ['my life (...) I can neither pass over it nor under it nor along it nor beside it. I limit myself to staying alongside it beside it. Almost next to it'].¹ She uses a variety of object-based images and similes to explain her life. The threefold simile between life, house and the surface of an egg illustrates her condition of permanent dissociation as well as her ability not to succumb. If, on the one hand, it is impossible for her to hold firmly to her slippery egg/life, the egg's compactness enables her to bounce back whenever she falls, so she can stand in spite of the cracks in her house/life:

io continuo a starci dentro la mia vita sebbene si riempia di crepe e spaccature, metto vetrini tra le crepe come fanno gli operai che devono saggiare la stabilità di una casa.

Anche la mia casa è piena di ponteggi spaccature vetrini di prova ma sta ancora in piedi la mia casa. (Castaldi 1999: 10)

[I'm still staying in my life even though it's filling up with cracks and crevices, I insert pieces of glass between the cracks as builders do to test the stability of a house.

My house is full of scaffolding cracks pieces of glass too but it's
still standing my house.]

The subject Castaldi portrays is therefore not so much fragmented as non-unitary and finds its power and *raison d'être* in female difference: the egg contains life, and women's capacity to generate life is a crucial theme in her oeuvre.

The inner instability of Castaldi's characters is accompanied by an unrelenting, almost normalized, condition of uprooting and geographical transience. *Per quante vite* and *Che chiamiamo anima* are set in Pfeffingerstrasse, a melting pot of people from different ethnicities living in a condition of existential non-belonging (none of them have Italian names).² Life in Pfeffingerstrasse, a microcosm and an allegory of Naples, Italy and the wider world (Giorgio 2007), consists of cyclical repetitions, expansions and compressions of time and space that collapse different periods and different places into one, confuse reality with dreams, visions and hallucinations, dissolve identities, merge life and death. Wars, genocides, migrations, cyclones, volcanic explosions and fires come and go within a few lines, the narrative focusing on their profound and lasting effects. Castaldi's stories originate in loss and death and depict a fugitive and suffering humanity wavering between being and non-being, life and after-life. Characters, landscapes, objects and names, images and metaphors appear and reappear across different novels, making her oeuvre one long narrative continuum which disregards story, plot and chronology, thus contravening narrative verisimilitude. Her refined poetic style, which has been praised by many critics (Klobas 1993; Segre 1994), reflects the characteristics of this narrative space. Parataxis and full stops, which proliferated in Castaldi's earlier work, give way in later narratives to long, unpunctuated sentences, a stylistic change that reflects the author's move from a fragmented to a

‘fluvial, magmatic’ perception of space (Castaldi 2001a: 25).³ Accordingly, sentences often fade into lists of nouns, denoting objects of everyday life, and infinitives, which transport us from the mundane into an atemporal cosmic space. Castaldi’s work makes no easy reading: it demands patience and hours of undivided attention;⁴ it defies interpretation and rarely grants the pleasure of closure. Yet it appeals to a faithful, discerning and heterogeneous, though small, readership that includes young people, as attested by the readers’ reviews posted on the publishers’ websites.

In Castaldi’s alienated and alienating world, the object and concept of house/home are continually interrogated.⁵ The aim of this article is to assess what happens to house and home when we look at the ‘hostile space [...] of hatred and combat’ that Bachelard excludes from his investigation of house images as reveries of the ‘space we love’, on the grounds that it ‘can only be studied in the context of impassioned subject matter and apocalyptic images’ (Bachelard 1969: xxxi–xxxii). This is precisely Castaldi’s world. If, as the French philosopher claims, the house, in its verticality from cellar to attic, is the abode of human consciousness, then houses will by necessity also mirror, reveal and accommodate the hurricanes and apocalypses of the external world, the inner as well as the outer strife of the contemporary subject, and indeed the conflict and violence that take place in the home, when childhood, contrary to Bachelard’s vision, is not experienced as ‘enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house’ (Bachelard 1969: 7).

I have chosen to focus on *Per quante vite*, a novel where the word *casa* [house/home] appears on practically every page. Here the house has lost all the connotations attached to the bourgeois dwelling consisting of many rooms and rich in decorative house objects, conceived and imagined as a haven and a source of stability for the family. This type of house is to be found in Castaldi’s *La montagna* (1991,

written in 1985) [*The Mountain*], even though at the end of the novel the house no longer fulfils this function. In an unusual example of pathetic fallacy, a personified house reacts to the neglect of the family members for each other and, feeling in turn neglected, withholds her warmth and protection. The motif of relocation due to the dispersion of the family on which *La montagna* ends is replaced by that of migration and homelessness in ‘Storia della casa idiota: racconto 1984’ (1990) [‘Story of a stupid house: tale 1984’], the story, almost a parable, of a couple who arrive on an island, build a house and have a baby. Then, when a storm causes the river to swell and their house is swept away, they go back to where they came from: ‘che nessuno sa esattamente dove fosse o se ne andarono su un’altra isola. Su un’altra terra’ (Castaldi 1990: 81) [‘but nobody knows exactly where this was or they moved to another island. To another land’].

The themes of precariousness, the demise of the home as an enduring object that houses successive generations, the loss of roots and the absence of community return in Castaldi’s later works in a complex sociopsychological scenario of personal loss and global dispersion (see *Che chiamiamo anima* and *Dava fine alla tremenda notte* [2004] [*The Terrible Night Came to an End*]). In *Per quante vite*, Dora has to move continually to make space for her landlords’ and landladies’ relatives who are getting married, having a child, or returning from distant places, or because her house is destroyed. The reconstruction of Pfeffingerstrasse after a war and of Crescent Street (where she lives when she moves to America) after a cyclone never stops. Houses are lost and found in the space of a few lines. Within a few more lines, Dora has already packed her belongings and taken them to a new house, where she embarks on the difficult practical and psychological task of setting up home again. In the next two sections of this article I will examine the coincidence between house and psyche highlighting the protagonist’s

spatial dislocation, the loss of the maternal body leading to ‘homelessness’ and lack of memory, and the attempt to overcome this condition by means of creating alternative homes in the body and writing. We shall see that Castaldi does this by deploying a poetics of absence-presence and full-void that signifies both her protagonist’s neurosis and the remedies for it: her body’s *capacity* to contain and generate life and a writing practice which fills books with the matter of life and finds in books templates for life.

2. Castaldi’s houses/bodies and the poetics of the visible

Castaldi’s representation of the house/home is linked to her concern for positioning people, objects and landscapes in space: ‘Mi chiedo sempre cosa fa la gente nello spazio e cosa ci faccio io. Scrivo [...] come un pittore che deve costruire, inventare, cioè invenire/trovare lo spazio’ (Castaldi 2001a: 23) [‘I always wonder what people do in spaces and what I do. I write (...) like a painter who must build, invent, that is to say discover/find space’].⁶ Her houses are reduced to a few essential objects pertaining to the functions of sleeping, eating, reading and writing, seen in their positions in relation to one another and to the mind/eye that describes them:

Su un tavolo ci sono una tazza una caffettiera. Un letto rosso è appoggiato a una parete. Un tappeto verde è posato sotto le scarpe e su un tavolo piccolo e bianco sono posati dei quaderni aperti sempre alla stessa pagina con date di diario lontanissime nel tempo.

Da una finestra entra la luce e smette di entrare la luce. Ci sono due sedie due sedie un tavolo e neanche una sedia due sedie un tavolo né una finestra per il respiro. Quattro pareti quattro pareti e gli angoli tra le pareti si incurvano stringono assediano il non paesaggio degli oggetti. Per

terra c'è disordine e pentole e libri e fogli accatastati e pagine di diario aperte sempre alla stessa data. (Castaldi 1999: 12)⁷

[On a table there's a cup a coffee maker. A red bed is leaning against a wall. A green rug is placed under the shoes and on a small white table are notebooks that are always open on the same page with diary dates going back a long time.

The light comes in and stops coming in at a window. There are two chairs two chairs a table and not even a chair two chairs a table or a window for breathing. Four walls four walls and the corners between the walls bend over squeeze besiege the non-landscape of the objects. There's a mess on the floor and pans and books and sheets of paper piled up and diary pages always open on the same date.]

The first sentence recalls the famous opening line of one of French *nouveau roman* [new novel] author Alain Robbe-Grillet's snapshots: 'La cafetière est sur la table' (Robbe-Grillet 1962: 9). This is a revealing intertextual allusion, as Castaldi's prose exhibits the same neurotic quality as that displayed in the work of the practitioners of the *école du regard* [the school of gaze], who radicalized the poetics of the visible that has traditionally dominated novelistic representation (Musarra Schrøder 2002: 103). Robbe-Grillet attempted to chart physical reality by means of detached and rational descriptions that remained on the visible surface of things, with the aim of undermining the humanist subject and its illusory mastery of the world. Yet, his project is subtly invalidated by the partiality, bias and paranoia of the eye that 'photographs' things, as revealed in, for example, his profuse use of iteration, so much so that the anti-

representational thrust of some of his narratives may be easily recuperated to (psychological) realism (Morrisette 1963).

Castaldi applies an 'oblique' eye to reality, overturning the way we look at the world and taking further the poetics of the French *chosistes*, visibly parading the highly individual nature of her object-ive descriptions:⁸ rugs are placed under shoes; beds lean on walls; the passage of time (night and day) is alluded to by asserting and denying, in close succession, the existence of space and of objects in space (visible-invisible, appearance-disappearance, presence-absence); the principle of non-contradiction is blatantly flouted, allowing opposites happily to coexist. However, she outrightly renounces the formalist approach of the French authors, which empties out objects and 'flatten[s them] out into writing' (Britton 1987: 44). As we read on, we find that, just like humans, objects suffer, books bleed, things die, yet they have a life of their own and are not metaphors for humans.

In this narrative scenario, Castaldi's houses are both concrete and surreal. They are always seen from the inside and, in resembling blind boxes or cells – their windows are sometimes said to be *trompe l'oeil* (Castaldi 1999: 19) – they coincide with the narrator's agitated and introverted inner world. These features, together with the repetition of similar scenes and descriptions, produce a text that folds continually upon itself, evoking circularity and timelessness, as well as futility. Indeed, in Pfeffingerstrasse and in Crescent Street, everything and nothing happens. Each of their inhabitants 'cerca di portare a compimento le sue azioni incompiute senza riuscirci' (Castaldi 1999: 79) ['tries to bring unsuccessfully to completion their unfinished actions'] and, thus, paradoxically, in the two streets and in the lives of Castaldi's characters 'succedono sempre le stesse cose' (Castaldi 1999: 100) ['the same things keep happening']. This is further underscored by the fact that the novel is told entirely

in the present tense, which makes it impossible to ascertain whether events are imagined or are really happening, whether they are singulative or iterative or simply rehearsed, over and over again, in Dora's mind.

Yet, the narrative is far from being static or claustrophobic. Dora keeps building real and metaphorical, yet always tangible, houses, but she immediately undoes them, taking us to and fro between her obsessed body/house-bounded self and the breezy and vast calm of eternity, between matter and immateriality, between earthly and celestial bodies. The lists of nouns and infinitives reflect this movement and turn the narrative into an undifferentiated flow of words, matter and actions:

Il mio corpo diventa un impasto di polvere e sangue e con questa materia
costruisco una casa, una casa alta abitata da uccelli una casa senza mobilio
una casa senza ricordi lontana e vicina alle stelle, così posso viaggiare nel
cielo e le vedo vicine Sirio Canopo Vega Capella Arturo Rigel Procione
Archenor Altavi Betelgeuse Aldebaran Polluce Spica ed Antares Regolo
Castor Bellatrix Alhena. [...] La mia mitica casa è sfondata travolta da un
turbine infinito. [...]

Il giorno dopo morii. (Castaldi 1999: 48–9)

[My body becomes a mixture of dust and blood and with this matter I build
a house, a tall house inhabited by birds a house with no furniture a house
without memories far from and close to the stars, so I can travel in the sky
and I see them close up Sirius Canopus Vega Capella Arcturus Rigel
Procyon Achernar Altavi Betelgeuse Aldebaran Pollux Spica and Antares

Regulus Castor Bellatrix Alhena (...) My mythical house crashes knocked
down by an eternal whirlwind (...)

The next day I died.]

Dora's descriptions and declarations are indeterminate – does she really die? Of course not. She 'dies' at other times during the course of the novel, until she (apparently) really dies a few pages from the end. This indeterminacy is less about the cognitive limits of her senses and the subjective nature of her perceptions than an attempt to turn the invisible into the visible. The narrative switches between Dora's gaze on things and Dora herself who turns into a stage of the invisible. The spaces Castaldi represents are subject to a continuous dynamic process of filling up and emptying out that is consistent with this poetics of the visible-invisible. Dora's mind and psyche are unable or unwilling to store memories and her houses are too precarious to 'house' memories. They contain no chests, drawers or wardrobes, those items of furniture that are 'the houses of things': Bachelard's 'topo-analysts', who describe poetically what they imagine or dream, can only imagine this furniture full, even when its contents are hidden (Bachelard 1969: xxxiii–xxxiv). Furthermore, Dora lives in flats, horizontal dwellings which, lacking layers, also lack archaeology and history and are thus 'oneirically incomplete' (Bachelard 1969: 26). The huge apartment blocks of Pfeffingerstrasse have the same surreal and alienating quality as the superimposed Parisian boxes described by Bachelard as 'mere horizontality', being detached from both earth and sky, no longer set in natural surroundings, and lacking in intimacy as well as in cosmicity (27).

To counter her lack of memory, Dora glues tangible mementos of her everyday life to a tall screen which rises magically as soon as she steps into a new flat and vanishes when she leaves:

faccio ordine creo un paesaggio lo guardo attaccato sul paravento [...] incollo foto biglietti carte tappi foglietti dediche appunti tutte le cose che la vita mi lascia: un biglietto scritto da mio fratello il giorno prima del giorno in cui non sapeva di morire lettere di amici foto degli alunni biglietti di ristoranti opuscoli turistici foglie trovate per terra pezzetti di stoffa una fotografia di mia madre [...] una di mio padre [...] una di mio fratello [...] una lattiera presa in un albergo a Praga due rane [...] fogli di giornale con le guerre del mondo. (Castaldi 1999: 12)

[I tidy things up I create a landscape I look at it stuck on the screen (...) I stick on photos tickets papers bottle tops pieces of paper dedications notes all the things that life leaves me: a message written by my brother the day before the day on which he did not know he would die friends' letters photos of my pupils restaurant cards tourist brochures leaves found on the ground scraps of material a photograph of my mother (...) one of my father (...) one of my brother (...) a milk jug taken from a hotel in Prague two frogs (...) newspaper pages about the wars happening in the world.]

We may wish to invoke Freud's 'screen memory' here,⁹ be it a childhood event that is screened by a later memory (Freud 2002) or the recollection of an early event that screens a later, disturbing one (Freud 1962). However, Castaldi's Dora's screen is

neither a metaphor nor a concretization of the storehouse of her memories. It is a blank canvas, both impalpable and tangible, that acts as a temporary prop for the mementos of her past and present life. The mementos are not memory triggers, but are the memories themselves: the latter do not exist unless the mementos are placed on the screen, and the screen does not exist outside Dora's houses as both concrete objects and metaphors of her mind/psyche. Dora's memories are *phenomema* and belong to voluntary memory. All the same, Freud's screen memories can help us figure out Dora's screen, if we remember that they attempt to retrieve the 'birthplace' lost in infancy (Freud 1962: 322). Furthermore, Freud's statement, at the end of his life, that 'deeply buried within me there still lives the happy child of Freiberg, the first-born son of a youthful mother, who received his first indelible impressions from this [his native town's] air, from this soil' sets up an explicit association between the birthplace as the geographical location in which one is born and the birthplace of the mother's body (Freud 1961: 259). If '*hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences*' (Breuer and Freud 1955: 7; authors' emphasis), the neurosis affecting Dora, Freud's hysteric's namesake, originates in a *lack* of reminiscences, seeing that she lost her mother at birth. Ambiguous as the cure for the hysteric might be – is she cured when she forgets the traumatic events or when she remembers them fully and clearly? (Breuer and Freud 1955) – there is no cure for Castaldi's Dora, because she can neither remember nor forget: she has no memories, because she has no birthplace. How does Dora manage to live, then, when she believes that her life ended when she was born (Castaldi 1999: 61–2)? It is not my intention to name Dora's neurosis as hysteria, but simply to stress that Dora's inner battle is carried out and fought, as we shall soon see, on the 'surface', on what can be seen and, we could say with Naomi Segal, on the *skin*, as the hysteric has done for centuries and as her anorexic and bulimic counterparts continue to do today (Segal 2009).

The body, just like objects, spaces and landscapes, is represented through the ‘full-void’ and ‘presence-absence’ oppositions: ‘oltre la finestra non si vede più niente. Tutto sparito il paesaggio e con la sua perdita anche il mio corpo si svuota e Dora vi abita dentro come in un albero cavo posto di guardia alle porte della notte’ (Castaldi 1999: 23) [‘beyond the window there’s nothing to see anymore. The landscape’s all disappeared and along with it my body is emptied and Dora dwells in it as in a hollow tree that guards the doors of the night’]. Dora’s body turns into a container that will house and protect her in the manner of a Klein bottle that folds upon itself in such a way that its internal and external surfaces become indistinguishable. As a supply teacher, Dora fills the spaces vacated by others (Castaldi 1999: 24). She ingests enormous quantities of food and drink but is incapable of retaining them, something that can be read on many levels and be recuperated to varying degrees of realism: morning sickness; the desire both to fill up the identitarian void and not to (and the impossibility to) fill it up permanently; Dora’s/Castaldi’s compulsion to bring everything onto the surface (which, as I have just noted, brings Dora close to today’s hysterics). She often drinks, eats and throws up after making love, an act which is always described through a euphemism, yet a very physical one verging on the violent: ‘le sue mani mi stringono come tenaglie’ (Castaldi 1999: 22) [‘his hands grip me like pliers’].

Dora’s pregnant body is a home for a new being, even though an unsafe, shaky and anxious home (Castaldi 1999: 66). Threatened miscarriages and abortions signify bodies that are unable or unwilling to offer a home. Dora’s *figlia di polvere* [daughter of dust] is ‘born’ as soon as she is aborted and remains for ever with Dora alongside her vanished mother, two lacks that become concretized in Dora’s view of the world as being made of blood and dust, life and non-life/disintegration/death. Her ‘daughter of

dust' lives alongside her *figlia di sangue* [blood daughter], who is born later after two threats of miscarriage. Pregnancies bring into painful relief the absent maternal body:

[Mio padre] mi dice [...] che [mia madre] è morta quando sono nata ed io penso che è proprio come nelle favole: perché la principessa viva la regina deve sparire.

Lui è contento che nasca un bambino. Ne avevi bisogno, mi dice, tu che non hai mai conosciuto tua madre. Sarà un modo per avvicinarti a lei.

E io penso che le sue parole sono più vere di quanto lui stesso non pensi e vado in bagno a vomitare tutto il cibo che ho mangiato perché all'improvviso non c'entra più nel corpo tutto questo cibo preparato da mio padre e penso che la mia vita è finita quando sono nata perché l'unica alla quale avrei voluto mostrarla non c'è se n'è andata non è mai nemmeno esistita e non posso attaccare la sua faccia nemmeno sulle pareti del paravento. (Castaldi 1999: 61–2)

[(My father) tells me (...) that (my mother) died when I was born and I think it's just like in fairy tales: in order for the princess to live the queen must vanish.

He is happy that a baby is going to be born. You needed it, he tells me, since you never met your mother. It will be a way for you to get close to her.

And I think that his words are truer than he himself can imagine and I go to the bathroom to throw up all the food I have eaten because

suddenly all this food prepared by my father no longer fits into my body
and I think that my life ended when I was born because the only person I
would have liked to show it to is not around she left she has never existed
at all and I cannot even stick her face on the walls of my screen.]

This passage is underpinned by two feminist concepts: the daughter's dereliction and homelessness in the socio-symbolic and imaginary orders that predicate her existence/presence on the mother's disappearance (Irigaray 1980); the idea that we gain an understanding of ourselves only through the words and gaze of the (m)other (Cavarero 1997). Characteristically, Castaldi translates these ideas to the realm of the painfully literal and, consequently, consigns the desire for the mother to the realm of the irreparable and the impossible. Dora has no home to return to: her houses cannot serve the primary function that Bachelard's assigns them, namely to shelter day-dreaming, to protect the dreamer, to enable Dora to fulfil the human need of finding psychological refuge in familiar places and spaces of childhood (Bachelard 1969: 5–6). Here Bachelard and Freud join forces in proclaiming that, ultimately, without dreams and memories of our 'cradle', 'one would be a dispersed being' (Bachelard 1969: 7).

Dora finds two ways to circumvent this absolute loss: her body's *capacity* to contain and generate life and writing, both of which act as versions of home and antidotes to the void. Her own motherhood helps her to connect with her mother's voice and body/house:

Sento la voce di mia madre al di là del paravento e mi sembra di essere
ancora nel suo grembo e che intorno alla casa ci sia il corpo di mia madre
che tutta la terra sia un enorme grembo da cui nessuno è ancora uscito.

Come se non fossimo mai nati [...] Mi accuccio dentro il letto stringo forte Virginie. (Castaldi 1999: 82)

[I hear my mother's voice from beyond the screen and it feels as if I were still in her womb and my mother's body were surrounding the house as if the earth were an enormous womb nobody has yet come out of. As if we had never been born (...) I curl up in bed I hold Virginie very tight.]

Having started to reconstruct her interrupted female genealogy, Dora also sets out to build a home and a community. Dora's compulsion to bring things to the surface, her concern with 'things', her oblique way of looking at reality, her recurrent use of object-based similes and metaphors to describe her inner life, all this speaks of Dora's and Castaldi's engagement with female 'realism', the project, pursued by the Verona feminist philosophical community Diotima, of creating a new order which can *house* and represent the *fact* of sexual difference. It is a question of finding a way of turning women's attachment and special relationship to life and the real, rooted in their generative power, into thought, words and symbols (Diotima 1990). In the next section, we shall see how Dora realizes her project of rebuilding home and community by way of books, writing and other women. This project, we shall see, is still underpinned by the pursuit of a poetics of the visible.

3. Female 're-vision': writing home to her mother

Books are Dora's most valued possession and she experiences the strain of carrying them from house to house, the pain of having to dispose of them when she cannot find a home for them, the anguish caused by their destruction in war and other calamities.

After the war in Pfeffingerstrasse, Dora is employed to copy and bind damaged books. In America, she works in a ‘bunkerbiblioteca’ [‘bunkerlibrary’] transferring books to computer disks. Computers free books from the tyranny of time, space and decay, but also deprive them of their foundations in the concrete matter of life and of their materiality:

sento la mancanza dei tappi dei pezzi di carta dei biglietti delle piume di uccello degli escrementi di bimbo [...] Sento la mancanza di tutti questi residui corporali che non riescono a entrare dentro la mia macchina [...] riprendo a scrivere parole su parole ma nessuno me le fa stampare. Non toccherò mai le parole che scrivo. (Castaldi 1999: 91–2)

[I miss the bottle tops the pieces of paper the tickets the bird’s feathers the children’s faeces (...) I miss all these body residues which cannot get into my machine (...) I start writing again word after word but nobody gets me to print them. I will never touch the words I write.]

Moreover, as Dora will find out, computers and disks become corrupted and perish while virtual libraries may be destroyed by fire.¹⁰ She gives up trying to impose order on the chaotic proliferation of printed paper in the Babel of Pfeffingerstrasse (Castaldi 1999: 154–5) and starts composing the endless book of Life, weaving together different books in different languages with her own life: ‘Le parole si confondono, non riesco a rispettare la consequenzialità dei testi. In un testo di economia infilo tre pagine di Stendhal una pagina di diario una lettera di Iride e sterco di cane e piscia di bimbo e pianti di rane’ (Castaldi 1999: 87) [‘Words get jumbled up, I’m unable to keep to the

logical sequence of the texts. I slip three pages from Stendhal a diary page a letter from Iride and dog poo and child's pee and frogs' cries into an economics textbook'].

This method of writing is 'il punto di arresto del *disfieri*' ['the point where the *undoing* stops'] invoked by feminist philosopher and member of Diotima, Luisa Muraro (2006), corresponding to a (female) writing practice that halts the (male) postmodern undoing of the world and the word. Castaldi's screen exemplifies precisely this feminist writing project. The screen is about seeing and referentiality: Dora glues concrete snippets of life to it and creates a landscape, that is to say she creates a visible reality with scraps of life, which she then translates into words and enters into a computer. Thus, words are always referential and not only self-reflexive signifiers. Dora establishes a two-way process between books and life, by 'enfleshing' one particular book, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's 1788 novel *Paul et Virginie* [*Paul and Virginia*], through her own life. I need to turn now to Muraro's defence of experience. Using Joan W. Scott's argument that 'experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted' (Scott 1991: 797, author's emphasis), Muraro (2006) posits a 'philosophy of experience' which calls upon the subject for continuous re-interpretation: this in turn leads to on-going resignification of the subject itself and the world. Here resides, for Muraro, the potential for breaking through the impasse of poststructuralist thought and its inability to think a different symbolic. Castaldi's adoption of an intertext by a male writer is methodologically significant, as she demonstrates precisely the potential for symbolic change lying in the space between that which is already interpreted and that which awaits interpretation. I must underline one last aspect of Italian feminist theory and practice before I move on to Castaldi's engagement with *Paul et Virginie*: the fact that the link between lived experience – the

practice of *partire da sé* [starting from oneself] – and the word is activated by means of the practice of relationships between women (Ronchetti 2009: 104–7).

While in hospital for a threatened miscarriage, Dora befriends two women, Iride and Penhal. Penhal is from the Island of Mauritius, formerly the Île-de-France and the setting of Saint-Pierre's novel. She gives Dora a copy of the latter before dying, mysteriously, from a hysterectomy. Her death turns her gift into a legacy: *Paul et Virginie* becomes a resource for survival and a template for Dora's own life. The relationship that develops between Dora and the other woman, Iride, who is also pregnant, eventually re-enacts certain aspects of Saint-Pierre's story of Madame de la Tour, Marguerite and their children, privileging the female friendship and solidarity between the two mothers over the tragic love between their offspring. *Paul et Virginie* initiates Dora's 'homecoming', namely her writing herself home to her mother. Intertextuality enables Castaldi to bring together the main motifs underpinning the novel: house, maternal loss and writing.

Dora and Iride set up home together, but a war immediately separates them. While apart, they give birth and name their children Paul and Virginie. Iride writes to Dora, but then her letters stop. After her small community of friends dissolves, Dora moves to America, from where she sends letters to Iride at Pfeffingerstrasse, hoping they will somehow reach her. She copies passages from *Paul et Virginie* for her, realizing on paper her longing to be reunited with her. Writing her own life for her friend legitimizes Dora's existence. Iride – iris, eye, colour, rainbow – is the mirror that reflects Dora back to herself, replacing the mother to whose gaze Dora yearned to present her life. Dora continues writing to and searching for Iride, even when she finds her surrogate in Marguerite, a woman who moves in with her and gives birth to a boy whom they name Paul. After Paul's and Marguerite's expedient deaths, necessary for

Dora to organize her real homecoming, she hears that Iride is back in Pfeffingerstrasse. She leaves America and after a long search the two are reunited.

In her study of the rewritings of Saint-Pierre's novel, Marina Guglielmi claims that the current proliferation of communication systems has shattered the notions of literary paternity and textual *auctoritas* and, as a consequence, texts can travel freely and narrate any story. No longer physically present on our desks and thus no longer a text that may be quoted, whether parodically or ironically, *Paul et Virginie* is only an echo in the consciousness of twentieth-century writers (Guglielmi 2002: 176–7). It is as a hollow container, disconnected from its author, plot and characters, that, according to Guglielmi (2002: 178), *Paul et Virginie* enters *Per quante vite*: only one fragment of chaos, hardly resembling the original, among the many fragments of Dora's endless book. This is all Guglielmi has to say about Castaldi's dialogue with *Paul et Virginie*. Yet, *Paul et Virginie* could not be more *concrete* than it is in *Per quante vite*. Penhal gives Dora a copy, which she takes from house to house in Pfeffingerstrasse and in America. She copies and prints passages from it and sends them to Iride. These passages are quoted and clearly signposted with quotation marks on the pages we read. Dora's letters cross the ocean and are subjected to all the risks and vagaries of physical travel. Of all the books that go through Dora's hands, *Paul et Virginie* is the only one she quotes and which bears a title. It is clearly identifiable and is present in all its materiality and fullness, rather than being, as Guglielmi (2002: 179) argues, a dispersed, lacerated ghost whose tracks the reader, as a hound or sleuth, must retrace.

To be sure, there are references to Paul and Virginie's story early on in *Per quante vite*, well before the actual book appears in Penhal's hands and in the plot. These are references that, unless we have read the novel, we might only pick up in retrospect. For example, as Dora wakes up from the operation of the termination of her first

pregnancy, she perceives people moving around her with metallic objects in their hands. From here she moves on directly to describe the scene of Virginie's death at sea: 'Una montagna d'acqua di inimmaginabile grandezza s'ingolfò allora tra l'isola d'Ambra e la costa e s'avanzò ruggendo verso il battello minacciandolo con i suoi fianchi bui e le sue *cime tempestose* e si sentirono le grida di coloro che guardavano: "Salvatela, salvatela, non l'abbandonate"' (Castaldi 1999: 30–1, my emphasis) ['A mountain of water of unimaginable magnitude then crashed down between the isle of Ambra and the coast and advanced roaring towards the vessel threatening it with its dark flanks and *wuthering heights* and onlookers were heard shouting: "Save her, save her, do not abandon her"']. This is a free, yet very close, rendering of the original. The elements of Saint-Pierre's text have been scrambled and mixed with other literary reminiscences ('*cime tempestose*' ['wuthering heights']).¹¹ Yet, Paul and Virginie's story is part of Dora's very clear literary memory, the scene of Virginie's death surfacing in Dora's state of semi-consciousness to voice her grief for her lost (potential) child: 'Sogno una bambina [...] che [...] mi tende due piccole braccia [...] Tendo le mie braccia verso le sue mani dorate [...] Cerco di salvarla dalle acque [...] ma le sue mani mi sfuggono, le mie non riescono a raggiungerla' (Castaldi 1999: 30) ['I dream of a female child (...) who (...) stretches her small arms towards me (...). I stretch my arms towards her golden hands (...) I try to save her from the waters (...) her hands slip out of mine, my hands cannot reach her']. The fact that Dora and Iride decide to name their children Paul and Virginie even before Penhal's arrival on the scene indicates that Penhal's gift is the trigger for the actualization of what was already there as a potentiality: she is a kind of Madame Pace, the character that is called forth on stage, by magic, by the requirements of the plot/life of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Guglielmi's concern with the status of *Paul et Virginie* within *Per quante vite* seems to be of little

importance. What Castaldi does with Saint-Pierre is precisely what Adrienne Rich describes as ‘re-vision’: the act of ‘looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, entering an old text from a new critical direction’, which is an act of survival for women writers (Rich 1972: 18). It is literally an act of survival and self-creation for Dora.

Castaldi’s engagement with Saint-Pierre’s text is consistent with the themes of *Per quante vite* that I have outlined so far, which find resonance in an international feminist culture of maternal and female genealogies that has formed during the past thirty years. While the twentieth-century rewritings (by three male authors) examined by Guglielmi focus on Paul and Virginie, Castaldi concentrates on their mothers and the potential of relationships between women to rebuild the subject, the family unit, the home and the community. Back in Pfeffingerstrasse, Dora discovers that her letters had never reached Iride. Dora *must* find Iride, so that her letters can be read by her and activate the circuit of life writing, whereby life and writing circularly legitimize one another: ‘voglio che Iride le legga prima di metterle nel libro interminabile, altrimenti sarebbero pagine bianche cieche mai scritte. *Tutto il mondo non verrà mai alla luce senza nessuno che lo legga*’ (Castaldi 1999: 140, my emphasis) [‘I want Iride to read them before I put them into the never-ending book, otherwise they would be white blind never-written-upon pages. *The whole world will never be born* if nobody reads it’]. Here Castaldi continues to insist not only on the visible (in the juxtaposition of blindness and light) as the vital link between text and life, but also on the crucial role of the (female) subject in realizing this link and contributing to the re-creation of the world.

Without Iride and Paul, Dora and Virginie cannot take possession of the place in the world that Iride and Paul have helped them to create. They attest to Dora’s acquisition of a degree of self-agency, her ability to ‘give birth’ to herself and the world, that is to say Diotima’s project to ‘mettere al mondo il mondo’ [‘give birth to the

world’], to inscribe the symbolic with sexual difference, through the example, the words and mediation of other women (Diotima 1990): ‘per avere di nuovo la sensazione che questa casa è la nostra casa che questa strada è la nostra strada che questo mondo è il nostro mondo e non un posto qualunque dove siamo capitate per caso’ (Castaldi 1999: 142) [‘in order to feel again that this house is our house that this road is our road that this world is our world and not just any old place where we have ended up by chance’]. When Dora and Iride finally find each other, they set up house and recreate the idyllic natural enclosure in which Madame de La Tour, Marguerite, Paul and Virginie lived:

Lì trascorriamo bellissimi giorni. I più felici.

Nell’orto piantiamo semi di cavolo di carciofo di insalata di basilico, più in là piantiamo belle di notte fiori di vetro e primule blu. Paul e Virginie ci aiutano nel lavoro. Ci basta essere vicini, guardarci lavorare, sapere di essere insieme per essere contenti.

Lavoriamo e mentre lavoriamo rimando a memoria le pagine del libro: ‘I doveri della natura aggiungevano ancora qualcosa alla felicità della loro alleanza. La loro amicizia raddoppiava alla vista dei loro bambini [...] “Amica mia,” diceva madame de La Tour, “ciascuna di noi avrà due bambini e ciascuno dei nostri bambini avrà due madri.” [...] Già le loro madri parlavano del loro matrimonio sulle loro culle e questa prospettiva di felicità coniugale con cui esse addolcivano le loro proprie pene finiva per farle piangere, ma si consolavano pensando che i loro figli, più felici, avrebbero goduto, lontani dai pregiudizi dell’Europa, dei piaceri dell’amore e della felicità dell’uguaglianza.’ (Castaldi 1999: 143–4)¹²

[There we spend very beautiful days. The happiest days.

In the vegetable garden we plant seeds of cabbage artichoke lettuce basil, further down we plant moonflowers, purslanes and blue primroses. Paul and Virginie help us with this work. It is enough for us to be close to one another, to look at one another working, to know that we are together to feel happy.

We work and while we work I recite from memory the pages from the book: ‘The duties of nature added something more to the happiness of their alliance. Their friendship increased twofold at the sight of their children (...) “My friend,” Madame de la Tour would say, “each of us will have two children and each of our children will have two mothers.” (...) Their mothers were already speaking of their marriage leaning over their cots and this prospect of conjugal happiness with which they soothed their own suffering ended up making them cry, but they consoled themselves with the thought that one day their children, more fortunate, would enjoy the pleasures of love and the blessing of equality far from the prejudices of Europe.’]

The garden is the *locus amoenus* to which the foursome retreat and where Paul and Virginie fall in love. Their happiness in the garden means that life can write itself and memories can create themselves, writing and the screen being no longer necessary.

However, the harmony and magic that preside over the garden and their lives are not forever. As in the intertext, the little community must confront external incursions: Yeronimus Müller, the father of Dora’s ‘child of dust’ (and perhaps of Virginie), reappears; the landlady asks them to leave the house; Virginie gets pregnant

unexpectedly. These intertwined circumstances precipitate events and take Dora's life and the book we are reading to their conclusion within ten pages. Dora relives the storm of her abortion and regrets not having ever spoken to Virginie about her 'sister of dust'. Virginie first decides to have an abortion, then wavers in her resolve and is pulled out of the operating theatre by Dora's order. The house and garden cannot be recreated, because the new houses in Pfeffingerstrasse are not big enough, an intimation that separation is necessary. They are forced to take two smaller houses, which poses a dilemma: 'non sappiamo come ci divideremo nelle nuove case [...] Forse lei deve stare con suo figlio e io con mia figlia?' (Castaldi 1999: 152-3) ['we don't know how we will split ourselves up in the new houses (...) Perhaps she must live with her son and I with my daughter?']. The solution is presented indirectly as a *fait accompli* on the next page, where we are told that Dora and Iride continue with copying books in between their visits to Paul and Virginie. While Saint-Pierre's young couple succumb to the onslaught of French colonial economic power and morality and die, Castaldi's young lovers survive outside the garden of Eden and succeed in grounding themselves in reality. Dora tells Virginie about her 'sister of dust', Virginie is deciding whether she should continue her pregnancy or not, Iride and Dora buy the bookshop where they work and continue to write their book of Life. The novel intimates that a family might be formed within the home inhabited by Paul and Virginie and their offspring, now or in the future.

The novel ends with a long list of infinitives describing the mundane actions that Dora has always performed. This is after Dora's death apparently caused by her computer breaking down and her disks becoming unreadable (it is impossible to know whether her death is real, imagined or metaphorical, as she attends her own funeral). The very last word is 'L'eternità' ['Eternity'], enclosed between full stops and therefore presented in all its absoluteness. The list includes verbs related to generation and the

care of bodies: 'nutrire' ['to feed'], 'sfamare' ['to allay hunger'], 'dare la vita' ['to give life'], 'togliere vita' ['to take away life'] (Castaldi 1999: 158). Castaldi's novels often end with infinitives, a stylistic device that emphasizes the continuation of Life beyond individual lives. Here too the infinitives seem to switch the focus from Dora to the 'work' of all women, including Virginie, to generate life, beyond this particular story and this particular book.

4. Conclusion

In *Per quante vite* houses are a microcosm of a world rife with instability and conflict, which makes it impossible for them to turn into homes and to provide a safe and enduring place for family life. Yet, Dora and her friends show resilience and the ability to set-up 'house' everywhere, by erecting metaphorical homes they can take with them. It should be noted that Dora is not immune to the prosaic obsessions affecting many of the female characters created by the Italian writers mentioned in my introduction. Her battle against dust and her vain efforts to impose order on the chaos that reigns in her flats can be naturalized as the simple drudgery of housework and the housewife's frustration at the never-ending cycle of cooking, feeding and cleaning (Castaldi 1999: 26), encapsulated in the phrase 'a woman's work is never done'. The blood that recurs in Dora's life and the novel is menstrual blood and Castaldi explores it in its implications for a woman's life: pregnancies, abortions, post-abortion depression, hysterectomy, death, but also motherhood and its rewards. Dora is also vulnerable as a single woman who, in an already precarious world, must combine work with motherhood. All this is not, however, put to the service, as in 1970s narratives, of a critique of patriarchal relations: in Castaldi's work there are no married couples, but pregnancies outside marriage and single motherhood seem to be the norm, and abortions

are carried out in public institutions and accepted as a fact of life. In *Per quante vite*, the toils of women's daily lives are both important and unimportant, forming an ostensibly glossed-over substratum for the macroscopic, all-consuming, inward and outward concerns that I have detailed in the previous pages. More importantly, Castaldi privileges a post-emancipationist focus on female difference and the maternal, that is to say on the need to reconstruct female genealogies, women's ability to (re)create a female community, the production of a text 'full' with the matter of life, which can break through the paternal to house women's difference and women's lives. Her 're-vision' of an intertext written by a man indicates that it is possible to mark the symbolic with difference even though we are forced to speak from within a male symbolic. Dora achieves this through the female mediation of Penhal and Iride. In giving Dora Saint-Pierre's novel, Penhal initiates the process, taken forward by Iride, Dora and Virginie, of resignifying it as a text of female solidarity and female community that could lead to the renewal of family and societal relationships.

While, on the one hand, the task and effort of setting up homes capable of offering refuge and protection against a permanent condition of precariousness appear to be futile, on the other hand Castaldi seems to be putting forward the family as the starting point for the reconstruction of the subject and the community. She is not, however, necessarily advocating the traditional family triangle. In *Il dio dei corpi* (2006) [*The God of Bodies*], for example, as already in *La montagna*, a man takes care of a child who is not his own while its mother works elsewhere, and thus new family configurations and gender roles are considered and evaluated (Giorgio 2008). It is not clear how this sits with the affirmation, in *Per quante vite*, of the mother-child relationship as a non-negotiable requirement for the (female) individual's psychosocial well-being, his or her ability to feel 'at home' in the world. The notion that the maternal

body is the home *par excellence* is also to be found in *Che chiamiamo anima* and in *Calco*, condensed in the phrase ‘Sei tu casa’ (Castaldi 2002: 279; 2008: 13) [‘You are home’] addressed by a daughter to her mother.¹³ It appears that in Castaldi’s universe, this primary home and bond override all others, to the point that their absence compromises the subject’s self-identity, but also to the point of spurring the female subject, Dora, as a character that is a mother and who writes, to leave her female imprint on the symbolic and the imaginary, as Irigaray (1981) and Diotima (1990) urge women to do through generating bodies as well as books. Castaldi upholds the maternal function, understood in this wider sense, as a force capable of keeping at bay the apocalypse of today’s world.

Notes

* I wish to acknowledge Paula Green’s work, which opened my eyes to the theme of the house in Castaldi. I also owe Paula the title of the third section of this article (Green 2004a, 2004b). I am grateful to Eliana Maestri for having made me think harder and write a better article, and to the anonymous referees whose requests for expansion gave me an opportunity for critical rethinking.

1 The translations are my own. I thank Ruth Malloy for her precious advice on how to improve them.

2 It is not obvious why Castaldi has chosen ‘Pfeffingerstrasse’ to refer to Naples. It has also proved impossible for me to consult the author herself before this article went to press. I outline here a hypothesis, though with much caution, not least because Castaldi often informs us, in notes at the end of her novels, of how certain (accidental) elements of reality have made their way into her mind and have been transfigured in her writing. There are Pfeffingerstrasse’s in both Basel and Leipzig, both named after Johann Pfeffinger (1493-1573), a Protestant reformer and theologian who lived and died in

Leipzig. I am not aware of possible links between Castaldi's work and Johann Pheffinger's doctrines. There may, however, be links between Naples and Leipzig, as cities that were heavily bombed and devastated during World War II. Both cities went through a major process of restoration and reconstruction after the war. Castaldi's Pheffingerstrasse is in a continuous state of rebuilding and its ruins are often associated with the ruins of other cities (as, for example, Dresden in *Che chiamiamo anima*). The ongoing reconstruction of Pheffingerstrasse could allude to Naples' recent past and its chronic housing problems as well as to the precariousness of life under Vesuvius. (The Neapolitan volcano hovers over, when it is not central to, Castaldi's narratives, from *La montagna*, featuring a cavernous, roaring and bleeding mountain, through *Fermata Km 501* (1997) [*Stop at Km 501*] and *Che chiamiamo anima*, to *Calco* (2008) [*Cast*].) By using almost exclusively foreign names for both places and characters, Castaldi may wish simultaneously to point at Naples' cosmopolitan heritage, the changing ethnic configuration of Italy following the recent influx of immigrants, the high mobility and nomadism of contemporary life and, more generally, the postmodern condition of physical and psychic displacement.

3 Castaldi says that she has always used commas sparingly, believing that a comma is not strong enough to shatter the world but is strong enough to break the flow and continuity between things (Castaldi 2001b: 78, 81).

4 Her novel *Dentro le mie mani le tue: tetralogia di Nightwater* (2007) [*My Hands Holding Yours: Tetralogy of Nightwater*] is 720 pages long.

5 In English the words 'house' and 'home' normally refer, respectively, to a building for human habitation and a space where one finds nurture, rest and refuge. However, recent research highlights the interconnectedness of the two concepts: they both encompass a physical and social space where family and social relations are negotiated (Munro and

Madigan 1999: 107). The Italian language, on the other hand, does not distinguish between ‘house’ and ‘home’. When I started writing this article, I pondered whether each occurrence of the word *casa* in Castaldi referred to house or home. In the end, I decided to use ‘house’ for most textual occurrences and in my own discussion for two main reasons: being forced to move continuously, Castaldi’s characters do not often succeed in making a home for themselves; and, as we shall see during the course of my analysis, Castaldi converts even the innermost aspects of life into concrete objects and houses are part of this project.

6 This is a compelling concern in the collections *Abbastanza prossimo* (1986) [*Almost Nearby*], *Piccoli paesaggi: racconti 1987-1991* (1993) [*Small Landscapes: Short Stories 1987-1991*] and *In mare aperto* (2001c) [*In the Open Sea*].

7 The repetitions in this quotation and in any subsequent quotations are in Castaldi’s original.

8 The word *chosistes*, from *choses* [things], is yet another way of referring to the practitioners of the *nouveau roman*. It emphasizes their concern with things and objective reality.

9 I thank Charlotte Ross for drawing my attention to Freud’s screen memories.

10 In *Per quante vite* we hear echoes of many literary libraries, from Luigi Pirandello to James Joyce, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, and many other European writers (Baroncini 2003).

11 The French original ‘ses sommets écumants’ is translated as ‘creste schiumanti’ [‘foaming crests’] in the Italian translation currently in print. Some of Castaldi’s vocabulary echoes the French original: see, for example, ‘s’ingolfa’ [‘it becomes engulfed’] for ‘s’engouffra’, which is rendered as ‘penetrò [‘penetrated’] in the Italian

version. All the references are to Saint-Pierre 2003: 248–9 (French–Italian parallel texts).

12 *Paul et Virginie* is also quoted on pages 109–10, 111, 116 and 119.

13 Castaldi informs us that she owes the phrase to her daughter (Castaldi 2002: 291).

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